

Admiration at Last



Artists Bettina Lesieur and her father, Robert Lesieur, are exhibiting their work together for the first time at the Helen Bumpus Gallery.

Staff Photo by Bill Wadsworth

Father-Daughter Artists Take Each Other's Measure

By Laura Collins-Hughes

Listen to Robert Lesieur, who has spent a lifetime as an artist and art teacher, and you soon learn that painting is not as easy as A-B-C — even if a quick-fix culture would rather that it were. "It's so evident on your TV shows when someone comes on

and says, 'Now you, too, can be a painter. Just follow along with me,'" says the 78-year-old artist, who compares learning to be a painter with a child slowly learning to crawl, then stand, then walk, then finally to run.

"But until he went through those things, he wasn't going to run anywhere," explains Mr.

Lesieur. "Art is much the same way. You've got to have the patience to go through the grubby parts. It's the same with a musician. You have to do the scales before you do a composition."

His daughter, Bettina Lesieur, has been doing the scales — artistically speaking — since

childhood. Now, at 39, a mere three months after her father's first-ever approving comment about her work, the two are in a group show together at the Helen Bumpus Gallery. It is the first time they have exhibited in Duxbury and also the first time

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they have exhibited together.

Ms. Lesieur, who gives private art lessons at Duxbury Elementary School and last week won a prize for her painting, "Lacoste Provence France," in the Duxbury Art Association's Midsummer Art and Craft Show, vividly recalls the compliment from her father, whom she characterizes as "very particular."

"He said, 'Now, that's a good piece,'" she says. "I almost fell on the floor."

In an interview, Mr. Lesieur, a former commercial artist who is planning to move to Duxbury in the near future, does not seem like a tough guy. He is charming and knowledgeable, fond of plein-air painting, likely to wax rhapsodic about the light or discuss how he'd like to get his

painting group from Canton, where he lives, down to Duxbury to capture some of the scenery. But he laughingly admits that, as far as his daughter goes, he was "an awful critic all the way."

"I had her in tears half the time," he says. "That's why I'm not a good teacher."

That, he says, is because his standard is the masterpieces he has seen so many times in museums.

"I have little patience with that which doesn't begin to measure up," he says. "I sort of half expect it all the while."

But Ms. Lesieur, who lives on St. George Street with her husband, Jeffrey Lowell, is finally up to his standards — 20 years after she turned down a full, four-year scholarship to the Rhode Island

School of Design, thinking she wanted to be a veterinarian. Having watched her parents — her late mother, Maria, was an oil painter — toil as artists, she knew she did not want to compromise herself to make a living. And she didn't want to end up hating what she loved.

But several years ago, she decided to devote herself to art, where her love of animals comes through in her pet portraiture. Now in the midst of a fascination with French scenes she paints from a recent trip, she is finally doing what makes her happy.

And her father finally believes she is doing it well.

"It's almost like understanding a language," he says. "Now she's learning to see as well as to hear."

For her part, Ms. Lesieur speaks in glowing terms of her father's facility with all kinds of media. With a determined look in her eye, she says she is trying

to emulate his skill at capturing light and shadows. He is particularly adept, she says, at portraiture — but after three attempts, he has never been able to capture her image.

To her, this is significant. To him, it is akin to his ability to paint better when he is in a new place.

"Looking at Bettina day in and day out," he says, "I just don't know what she looks like anymore."

Through Sept. 3, Bettina and Robert Lesieur's work is on exhibit with the paintings and photographs of Jack Haran, Scott Hecker, Anne Henning and Ann Hoban in the Helen Bumpus Gallery at the Duxbury Free Library, 147 St. George St. Hours are Monday through Thursday from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. and Friday and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. For information, call 934-2721.